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WASHINGTON, Feb. 25—While their planes and missiles are shooting at each other in Vietnam, the United States and the Soviet Union have been telling each other in recent weeks that they still regard direct accommodation as their most important foreign business.

Hence they continue a guarded program of cultural exchange. They are moving toward final ratification of a consular convention. They are planning for direct air service between Moscow and New York. They are near the end of negotiations for a treaty to prohibit the passing of nuclear secrets to other nations. They have signed a treaty to limit their military activities in space. They are exploring the basis for a tacit or explicit agreement to curb the development of missiles and anti-missile missiles. And they are maneuvering in what may be a cooperative effort to find a peace settlement in Vietnam.

The chill in relations that may now be wearing off began in early 1965, with the first raids on North Vietnam while Premier Kosygin was visiting Hanoi. The two Governments were then discussing the possibility of a Johnson visit to the Soviet Union. Moscow appeared to be saying that it did not care what Washington did in South Vietnam provided it did not carry the war to a friendly Communist nation, North Vietnam.

The bombing and the rapid build-up of American troops in South Vietnam posed a series of new problems for the Kremlin and it retaliated with petty harassment, the avoidance of direct negotiation and bitter invective.

Moscow's Moves

In this way, Moscow tried to disprove the charges of Communist China that it was "collaborating in aggression" with the United States. It had to increase its shipments of arms and supplies to North Vietnam. It had to curtail its diplomatic activity for a political deal in Vietnam. And it had to worry about—and work against—a Chinese intervention in the war that might have provoked a Chinese-American war and invoked the Chinese-Soviet defense alliance.

Nonetheless, over recent months, the Soviet leaders began to show a revived interest in diplomacy with the West, agreements and trade with the United States, and negotiations over Vietnam.

They accepted the space treaty, because it would not prohibit anything either side was planning. They jumped at the air agreement, which they had long sought, because President Johnson offered it with the blandishment of trade and better relations.

They responded to new overtures on a treaty against nuclear proliferation because Washington dropped the demand that the treaty sanction a future Atlantic nuclear force. And they agreed to listen to appeals against the further deployment of anti-missile missiles because they sensed some hope of also curbing offensive missile production.

The Soviet interest in these agreements could be explained by the fact that each promises some real return. But a larger shift in Soviet policy—looking toward a lively commercial relationship and perhaps an eventual pullback of

troops from Central Europe—may now be developing.

Communist China's foreign and domestic failures probably account for most of the change. Moscow has won its battle for authority in the Communist world—wooing back the Communists of North Korea and Japan and perhaps even of North Vietnam. It is thus more free to pursue its own interests again.

Moreover, the turmoil in China has brought Peking and Moscow so close to an open split that the Soviet leaders are thought to be eager to shore up their western flank lest they become involved in more than a cold war on the eastern.

Still another cause of concern in Moscow may be the chance that China will soon cease to be an effective source of supply for North Vietnam, thus placing the full burden on the Soviet Union and raising the risks of a direct clash between Soviet and American forces over supplies reaching North Vietnam by sea.

The Johnson Administration has offered to proceed with every kind of agreement in which it also sees value. And sensing the Soviet interest in peace in Vietnam, it has deliberately taken a stiff position to see how much influence Moscow can bring to bear in Hanoi.

Apart from Vietnam, the most difficult negotiations center on the anti-missile missiles, already being deployed around Moscow. To American appeals that they help prevent another costly and futile round in the arms race, the Russians reply that they cannot accept a position of permanent strategic inferiority. Noting the American boasts of a 3-1 or 4-1 superiority in offensive missiles, they say a limit on arms production must embrace all weapons. But, obviously divided in their own ranks on the issue, they remain willing to talk.

SOVIET-AMERICAN RELATIONS—I

U.S. Sees an 'Alliance Against Major War'